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SUBJECT: HHS SECRETARY SWINGS THROUGH SOUTH INDIA

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¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Honorable Michael O. Leavitt, U.S. Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS), visited three of South India's largest cities from January 7-9, 2008. The visit provided the Secretary an opportunity to promote the importance of assuring

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product safety in an increasingly complex global marketplace. The visit also promoted HIV/AIDS awareness, discussed trafficking in persons, and encouraged regulatory reform. The Secretary's visit was well-received, and both regional and national press gave it extensive coverage. End Summary.

DAY ONE: CHENNAI

Talking Safety with India's Health Minister

¶2. (SBU) India's Union Minister of Health and Family Welfare, Dr. Anbumani Ramadoss, accompanied Secretary Leavitt to all of the January 7 events in Chennai, and the two held a formal meeting to discuss cooperation on product safety. Ramadoss explained that the Secretary's message of promoting systems and standards to assure the

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safety of exports from India to the United States was arriving at an opportune moment, when the Health Ministry is promoting structural changes to India's regulatory structure. Various portions of this reform are currently wending their way through the Indian parliament. He thanked the U.S. Government (specifically, HHS and the Embassy's Health Attache) for the support and advice it has provided, noting that it was extremely helpful as he tried to both increase the capacity of India's health system and restructure his Ministry's regulatory role.

¶3. (SBU) Secretary Leavitt applauded the Minister's reform efforts, and noted that an increasingly robust global marketplace requires a readjustment in the way all countries look at product safety. Emphasizing that he was not just directing his message towards India, Secretary Leavitt said the country's current efforts at reform provided an excellent opportunity to work cooperatively with

the United States to develop tools useful not only at a bilateral level, but also in a global context. The Secretary also proposed that his Department and India's Health Ministry create a Ministerial-level Working Group to develop a keener understanding of the relevant problems and propose solutions. Ramadoss heartily endorsed this idea, and agreed that the members of this group -- or groups -- begin meeting within six months.

14. (SBU) Secretary Leavitt and Ramadoss also discussed avian influenza (AI), and emphasized the importance of international cooperation. Leavitt thanked Ramadoss for India's continuing commitment to provide samples from human and avian cases of influenza, and Ramadoss reiterated his intention to work with the United States and other partners to monitor the threat posed by the H5N1 virus.

Promoting Better Health, Fighting HIV/AIDS

15. (U) Secretary Leavitt focused on health care and life sciences during his day-long visit to Chennai. At the Government Hospital for Thoracic Medicine (GHTM), one of India's premiere publicly operated facilities for treating HIV-positive patients, the Secretary met with staff and clients, and he learned about the

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facility's capabilities and challenges. Hospital staff showed the Secretary a copy of the "Follow-Up Counseling Toolkit" -- a

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compilation of charts, videos, and other information newly developed by the HHS Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for counselors to use in advising HIV-positive patients. The Secretary also learned more about the hospital's use of peer counselors and the importance of providing same-day reporting of test results, an important factor for patients who travel long distances to reach the hospital. The Secretary also saw other hospital facilities, including the pharmacy, laboratory, and pediatric center.

16. (U) Continuing the theme of HIV prevention, the Secretary later spoke at Chennai's Loyola College at the public release of a new curriculum developed with U.S. Government technical assistance. The "Celebrating Life" publication, intended for college-age audiences, teaches advisors and trainers skills for prevention, including how

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to maintain a healthy lifestyle, and dispel various myths about HIV/AIDS. The Red Ribbon Club (RRC), an innovative organization for college students supported by the Tamil Nadu State AIDS Control Society (TNSACS) and HHS/CDC under the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief, hosted the curriculum's public launch, and became the first organization to adopt the new curriculum. The launch ceremony included a group of RRC students who performed an energetic skit designed to help youngsters learn techniques for saying "no" to various unhealthy activities, including smoking, illegal drugs, alcohol, and promiscuous sex.

Supporting Collaboration in the Life Sciences

17. (U) The Confederation of Indian Industry (CII) hosted a seminar in Chennai on Indo-U.S. collaboration in the life sciences, health sciences, and public health, an event co-sponsored with Apollo Hospitals, India's first corporate chain of high-quality hospitals. Secretary Leavitt emphasized the importance of scientific

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collaboration to the 400-member crowd of (mainly) medical professionals, and noted that hundreds of Indian scientists are engaged in collaboration and training every year with HHS. He also spoke in favor of the Indian Government's plans to establish regulatory institutions modeled on the HHS Food and Drug Administration as a way of providing more efficient protection for consumers and building regulatory partnerships between the two countries.

DAY TWO: HYDERABAD

Promoting Pharmaceutical Safety

¶8. (U) In a city known for the strength of its pharmaceutical sector, on January 8, 2008, Secretary Leavitt visited two of Hyderabad's most prominent companies, Dr. Reddy's Laboratories (DRL) and Bharat Biotech Indian, Limited (BBIL). At DRL, Secretary Leavitt toured the pharmaceutical production facility and learned about the company's product portfolio, which consists largely of generics and active pharmaceutical ingredients (API), but will soon include biosimilars (drugs that mimic the design and effect of branded biotech drugs). Secretary Leavitt also discussed the company's quality-and safety-assurance programs with Dr. K. Anji Reddy, the company's Chairman. At BBIL, which produces a wide variety of vaccines, including an innovative rabies vaccine that it developed in partnership with HHS/CDC, the Secretary emphasized the importance of biotech product safety and the protection of intellectual-property rights.

Encouraging the Chief Minister to Support Pharma Safety

¶9. (SBU) Secretary Leavitt reinforced his message to the private sector during a meeting with Andhra Pradesh's Chief Minister, the Honorable Y. S. R. Reddy, that also included several other top State officials. The Secretary emphasized that the quality and safety of pharmaceutical products is critical for both Indian and American consumers and producers. He also stressed that a science-based regulatory environment encourages safety, while creating an effective platform for trade that benefits India, the United States, and other trading partners.

¶10. (SBU) Chief Minister Reddy noted the emphasis his Government places on health, and noted that 82 percent of his State's population is poor or low-income and needs government assistance to obtain health services. He briefed the U.S. Delegation on a recently launched insurance scheme, the Aarogyasri Health-Care Trust, which aims to provide health insurance to those who cannot afford it. Reddy invited U.S. and other foreign investors to explore opportunities to invest in "super-specialty hospitals," especially in the State's second-tier cities.

Combating Trafficking in Persons

¶10. (SBU) The Secretary met representatives of four different

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non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in and around Hyderabad that help combat trafficking in persons (TIP). Secretary Leavitt thanked the representatives for their work on this issue, and emphasized that combating TIP is an important policy of the President and his entire Administration. The NGO representatives told the Secretary that the problem appears to be growing, but that it is difficult to obtain precise metrics. Traffickers are often family members, community leaders, politicians, or even school teachers, but linkages between traffickers are usually informal, and not in the nature of organized crime. When asked about the Indian Government's efforts to combat TIP, the consensus of the NGO representatives was that the Government has improved significantly in this area over the past few years, but that much more needs to be done.

DAY THREE: KERALA

Emphasizing port security

¶11. (SBU) On January 9, 2008, Secretary Leavitt visited Cochin, an international spice-exporting hub in the State of Kerala, to promote

HHS's efforts to ensure the safety of food imported into the United States. The Secretary inspected the port of Cochin, one of India's 12 "national ports," through which flows a substantial amount of spices and seafood bound for the United States. The port's Chairman told Secretary Leavitt that he is "extremely conscious" of the importance of security, and noted that he recently chaired a Government of India committee on port security. As Secretary Leavitt toured the port by boat, the Chairman also explained plans for expansion of the port in an arrangement with Dubai Ports World, which manages the port's container facility.

Promoting Food Safety

¶12. (U) Secretary Leavitt later visited two major players in Cochin's spice industry, Synthite Industrial Chemicals and AVT McCormick. Synthite is one of the world's leading manufacturers of natural, spice-derived products, including spice oleoresins, essential oils, and food colorings. AVT McCormick, half-owned by Baltimore-based McCormick Spices, is a major producer of sterilized spices, and exports more than forty percent of its production to the United States. Both Synthite and AVT McCormick place a major emphasis on traceability from the original raw material (usually spices or peppers) to the final finished product. At both manufacturing facilities, Secretary Leavitt saw bar codes or tags placed on each package to identify the batch, location, and producers of the spices used to make each product. Synthite executives told the Secretary that their customers -- the international flavor companies that then mix Synthite's products and sell to major food processors -- "demand traceability" for all of their products. AVT McCormick's executives echoed the comments the Secretary heard from Synthite, saying "traceability is key" in the

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market.

¶13. (U) The companies' emphasis on food safety is not limited to ensuring traceability. Secretary Leavitt watched AVT McCormick employees load U.S.-bound containers with crates of spices. AVT McCormick's General Manager told the Secretary that they load the containers at their own facility to ensure there is no tampering. She added that they recently began video monitoring of the loading dock to enhance security. At both Synthite and AVT McCormick, Secretary Leavitt inspected the companies' onsite labs to test the

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safety of products.

Striving for a new safety paradigm

¶14. (U) Throughout his visit to South India, Secretary Leavitt engaged the press to emphasize the importance of protecting both American and Indian consumers from unsafe products. In Kerala, Secretary Leavitt told the press that he was visiting India "because

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it is my responsibility to ensure the people of the United States have safe and effective food, drugs, and medical products," a message he emphasized repeatedly throughout his visit. He added

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that "the United States imports more than two trillion dollars worth of goods every year. These goods come from 800,000 vendors to more than 300 different ports of entry." Secretary Leavitt explained it is no longer possible to inspect every container to stop dangerous products from entering the United States because of the enormous flow of goods into the country. In this "networked world," he said, we need new strategies such as "ensuring quality is built into every step of the production process" no matter where it occurs.

Comment

¶15. (SBU) Secretary Leavitt's visit received positive coverage throughout the duration of his trip, and his willingness to open

much of the visit to press coverage resulted in fairly accurate reporting, which is not always a given. Government officials, educational institutions, business organizations, and private companies all rolled out the red carpet, and participated eagerly in the visit. The Secretary's message of promoting safer products for both Indians and Americans appears to resonate with a wide audience.
End Comment.

116. (U). The HHS delegation cleared this cable.

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